

Tim France
OH 2334_7
Montana Historical Society
Montana Brewery Oral History Project
June 21, 2017

Brian Shovers: My name is Brian Shovers. Today I'm interviewing Tim France at Worden's Market, in Missoula. The date is June 21, 2017. The first questions I have is, what can you tell me about your connections to Worden's Market and its history?

Tim France: Well, my connections to Worden's are that they began probably in high school when I used to sneak over and buy kegs of beer from Worden's back in the day, in the sixties. As things ... as I continued ... moved on to college, I had a connection to the local beer distributor, who sold Olympia Beer. My father worked there. In the summertime, I would work on the beer trucks. I got hired as the campus representative for Olympia Beer on the U of M [University of Montana – Missoula] campus. I actually sold kegs out of Worden's Market to, you know, student drinkers in the early-seventies. That was pretty interesting.

BS: Do you know anything about the market itself, where and when it started?

TF: 1883.

BS: Really? Really.

TF: Yeah, this is the oldest, first and oldest grocery store in Missoula.

BS: Really.

TF: It actually started in Stevensville, Montana. Moved here in about 1890 when things were booming. A fellow by the name of Tyler Worden started the thing. He was ... I've got all the history ... I've got a stack of history. Tyler Worden started the whole thing. He had a brother that he hired to come out and the run the market as he moved into other things. He actually ended up being a state senator, I think. Senator or representative.

BS: Right.

TF: Was, you know, very prominent guy around here.

BS: It's always been in this location?

TF: This is the fifth location in downtown Missoula. It's been on four ... three of the four corners of this intersection. When we bought it, in the location across the street, to the east.

BS: When did you buy it?

TF: We bought it in 1981. We've had the store almost longer than any single Worden family member who ran it. I think if we get to forty we'll be there. Something like that. We're at thirty-six years now. So, yeah.

BS: In the 1980s did you interact with Missoula homebrewers in anyway?

TF: Yeah, yeah, we sure did as a matter of fact, you know, we sold all those supplies -- homebrewing supplies. We sold homebrew supplies for, I don't know, fourteen, fifteen years.

BS: Really.

TF: That was something, you know, new because it was illegal for people to do homebrew prior to that. I don't recall the year when it became legal, but it was in the early-eighties. You know, we did some research. We went to San Francisco to one of the homebrewers shows. We figured out what it was all about. We put in a big selection of stuff in here so we would cater to homebrewers. We would also participate with them in their little competitions as tasting judges, you know, and things like that. Yeah.

BS: Did you ever work directly with microbrewers?

TF: Well, we always have. Yeah, we always have. When you talk about the term microbrew, you know, it no longer works, you know, that term is over. In the eighties, I guess, you know, you were a microbrewery under the law in Montana if you were brewing less than 10,000 barrels.

That would include Bayern Brewing when they first opened here. The brewmaster, Jürgen Knöller, you know, he was hired by the then owner, a guy by the name of Reinhold Schulte, who was a German guy whose wife sat on the Board of Directors of Spaten. She was a Spaten family member. She was, you know, one of the most prominent brewing families in the history of brewing.

Jürgen came straight out of brewmaster school to Missoula. He couldn't speak English. He rented an apartment from me next door. We were the first people that got to know Jürgen. We were working hand and hand with him over time. One of the things that was important to us is, you know, we sell kegs of beer. This was far before he ever had a package, you know, that he could sell on the shelf. We always sold his kegs, but he and I worked together to put a plan together where he bought 5000 of these little five-liter cans. He filled those up for me and made the tapping devices available to me. We could sell his beer in packages on the shelf here. We were doing that.

Prior to that, though I should mention since we're talking a kinda historical chronology, you know. The first sorta Montana, if you wanna call it a microbrewery that actually really did very well, was Kessler [Brewing Company] when it made a comeback in the early-eighties. We had so much success with that, that we were selling eighty case a week of Kessler. That was at a time when those were about \$5.00 a six-pack, which was a huge jump for those days, you know. Everything else was still three bucks or two bucks or whatever. To do that, you know, was phenomenal. We did that and continued to do it until they had a bad batch of beer over there. Boom! That was the end of it. It's that quick.

BS: It was just one bad batch?

TF: Well, they didn't correct it. You know, they didn't get out and pick all the, you know They need to go out and pick all the beer up. Refund money and make sure people get new beer when it comes out. They just didn't get on it quick enough. It burned them. You know, it was about that time, when there were a lot of other, I guess you could say craft breweries that were popping up. That were strong, you know, Redhook out in ...

BS: Washington.

TF: ... in Washington. You had Sierra Nevada [Brewing Company] from Chico, [California]. You had ... I don't think Deschutes [Brewery] was goin' yet, but those are the two notable startups that were really, really prominent in this market from day one. We've always carried all of those.

BS: When you did start selling Montana microbrews or craft brews and why?

TF: Well, you know, I think I just, you know ... exactly what the dates are. I'm gonna say for Kessler was ... that was mid-eighties because I remember Kessler produced a stadium, University of Montana stadium commemorative label for their beer when the stadium opened for the first time, which is '85 or '86. I forget which one it is. I remember sellin' Denny Washington a stack of those so he could go over and sell 'em so he could go over and celebrate in his box. That would've been the beginning.

Also, you know, Jürgen -- when Jürgen came up. When Bayern became available of course we were all over that because, you know, if you wanna ask why. I mean, how many communities in the eighties, in the United States of America had a genuine German, malt master, chemist, brewmaster that knew how to make own his yeast from a single cell, that's making honest to God pilsner beer. In those days, nobody made pilsners. Everybody that was startup was doing ale because pilsner was too hard and too expensive. Are you kidding? Our job is beer. We gotta have it. It was so good! I mean, Jürgen's pilsner, to this day, I swear to God is the best pilsner in this country that comes in a bottle.

BS: He was located just down the street, right?

TF: Well yeah, at the end of the street at the railroad depot. He was in that building. Worden's actually almost moved from our location to that building at one point. Just didn't pencil out, but that was the why. You know, at that time, we were the only ... the premiere specialty beer retailer in the state of Montana.

BS: Really?

TF: I had twenty-two German beers at that time.

BS: Really!

TF: I was the first guy that had things like Sam Smith's, you know. I had a huge portfolio with Merchant du Vin. Charles Finkel, you know, he started it up about that time. We bought everything he had. We bought all of his Belgians. We bought Orval. We bought, you know, everything. I've been sellin' Sam Smith's for all that time. You know, thirty-five years.

BS: Right.

TF: It was just a natural for us to evolve with the times and move into the, you know Anything that is good, you know. If you're a beer drinker, you wanna drink good beer. If I can put good beer in front of my customers, then that's what I do. That's the why.

BS: You have any competition here in Missoula?

TF: Do I?

BS: Yeah.

TF: I have competition everywhere. Back in the day, nobody ... most of the competition that I had was price competition from major retailers like Safeway, etc. They just operated on a different margin than I did. They were not interested in the specialty beers at the time because their customers weren't shoppin' there for it. For them to load a bunch of money onto the shelf and then watch it sit there, they weren't interested. So, for a very long time, no, we had ... we really didn't have competition in terms of the specialty end of things. Now, of course, it's everywhere. You go to Ole's Country Store and you can probably find, you know a dozen Montana brews in there. We still are, you know, we're still the premiere ... the stuff shows up here first. The preemptive. We're preemptive, I mean, the minute that stuff becomes

available, we have it. Then also, there's certain things that are just totally inappropriate and don't even get a shot in the major stores because it's all corporate.

BS: Right. How many craft beers do you offer? How do you decide which ones to offer?

TF: We do not ... we rarely draw the line on anything. We wanna see everything. We wanna try everything. We essentially buy everything. We've put it on the shelf and then we let the customers determine whether or not it stays around. That's how we choose. If we're gettin' bored or it's gettin' stagnant, I'll get on the telephone to importers, distributors and say, "Hey! We need some new stuff." Because it's the key to our success is to keep driving the new stuff.

The numbers literally fluctuate every day. I get about a dozen deliveries a week of beer and wine, okay. Right now, I've probably have 300 different beers, but that will vary because I may get ten new ones. Today, I may get three new ones, you know. It's beyond ... it's now got to the point where people are so conditioned ... the customer is so conditioned now, to what the new beer is that these poor guys that are makin' beer for a living, they have to keep making and coming up with different new beers all the time otherwise they just get buried.

BS: Really? Really.

TF: Of course, from our perspective, it's kinda cool because we're still known for having all that stuff. People will come here specifically to find new stuff. On the other hand, we only have so much room. You know, we have a 5000 square foot store here. We don't just do beer, you know. It's a challenge. It's a trick to stay on top of it.

BS: What impact does the brewers' branding, and marketing have on your choice of brands to sell?

TF: Well, that can be huge, or it can be nothing. I mean, branding is a key component to anything you're gonna sell in retail. Some guys are really good at it. Some guys are not any good at it. If they're really good at it, there's a tremendous impact for us. If they're not, there's little or no impact for us. That's entirely driven by the marketing of the company and how they do it. A couple of interesting examples might be KettleHouse in Missoula because they were the first guys to start putting their beer in cans. As ... so they were pioneers in that respect. They reasoned, said "Hey! It makes sense." You put it in your backpack, you know. You take it on trips and boating. That's what the culture here is anyway. Now, we get cans from everywhere, including San Diego. Everybody's doing cans now. Little things like that have profound impacts. I have people coming from Salt Lake City. I had a person come in here 'bout six weeks ago. She walked up, and she had \$250 cash. She just put it on the counter and says, "I'm picking up \$250 worth of Cold Smoke for a friend."

BS: Geeze.

TF: You know, if you were doing with that bottles, it would be, you know, you'd have to have a pickup.

BS: Yeah. Is there any difference in the flavor between the can and the bottle?

TF: Well some people claim that there is. Of course, they put the same product in both. If there's a caveat to that, it's just that glass allows light in and light is the enemy of beer. On shelf, you know, the can probably outlasts the bottle in terms of freshness. Of course, you're looking at a 180 days anyway. If you got beer laying around even ¼ of that long, it has to be got out. It's like a loaf of bread.

[ringing phone]

BS: Do you deal directly with the brewers or do you go through a distributor?

TF: Well, under the law, we have, you know, Montana's a three-tier state, which means that if I'm gonna sell at retail any product, it has to have been passed through a licensed Montana wholesaler. Okay, so that's the law. Even though Jürgen is making beer here, and canning it there, he has it sell to the distributor who has to bring it here and deliver because that's the law. Okay. I think that answers your question.

BS: Do you know the origin of that law is?

TF: Yeah. Yeah, this is a law ... there are two or three major distributorships back in the sixties, okay, who lobbied for this with the State of Montana. They're just like, you know, how the tavern owners, you know, they protect the licensure, you know. So, they've got a finger, you don't get to do anything with respect to liquor in the state of Montana without havin' them, you know, with you. It's just nothing more than a self-serving protectionism. That's all it was. The three big ones were Earl's Distributing in Missoula. He was a master distributor for some things. There was one in Helena.

[ringing phone]

BS: Fun?

TF: No, Fun is up in Kalispell. There was a bigger one. It was a guy's name. What the hell was it? I forget. It might've been Great Falls. Then, one in Billings -- Intermountain. Yeah, those ... I might not be exactly right on who the big three were. Earl was definitely one of the big ones. Oh! Zip Beverage was also one of the big ones because the Watkins boys, you know, at that time, even at that time, they owned several distributorships. In fact, one of the Watkins brothers actually owned the precursor of Earl's Distributing, which was ... then became Parabidge [?] Distributing. Earl bought from Parabidge [?].

BS: Do you have any issues with the distributors?

TF: Issues?

BS: Yeah.

TF: No. You know, the three-tier system works kinda nice for us because if we were buying direct, you know, we wouldn't have the service that the distributor provides. You know, we wouldn't have guys comin' two or three times a week, you know, bringing in, calls in and stuff like that. We also wouldn't probably be able to efficiently handle as many brands, you know, because, I mean, it would just be harder to functionally much more difficult just to get the stuff onto the shelf and then get it out of here. No, I had don't have issues, you know, I think the three-tier system works pretty good for us little guys. I don't know about the big guys. I know Costco like to just own everything. I really don't give a damn about them.

BS: What is your take on Montana law regarding the production, distribution, and sale of craft beers?

TF: Well, thankfully we have made progress, you know. We're about as good as it gets right now, you know. After the last legislative session, but of course, you know, the tavern owners went kickin' and screamin' the whole way. I mean, the poor brewers took a lot of hits in the early days. Now, with the ... now there are, you know, there's so many. There's sixty-eight breweries in Montana now. Those guys have really done a nice job to organize and they've been able to take on the tavern owners, which is ... nobody's ever dreamed of doing that, okay.

I think, also, the tavern owners, there's a lot of people who are members of the Taverns Owners Association, who understand that their customers want these products. All right. I mean, they ... it's a double-edged sword for them. It's like, okay if a brewery opens up across the street, he's gonna sell pints and he's gonna sell growlers, which means those customers are not gonna come in my bar, right.

BS: Right.

TF: On the other hand, if it becomes a big hit, like say Cold Smoke, you better have a handle in your place or people are gonna go around you to the next guy because they want Cold Smoke. It's been an interesting, interesting ride. I think generally speaking, both the tavern owners and the distributors are kinda, you know, they have mixed feelings about all of this stuff because they're workin' harder to get the same thing. I just spoke with one of the distributors here in Missoula, couple days ago, he says that in Missoula and Butte -- he has the Missoula area, western Montana -- he said their on-premise is terrible. Which means, you know, the stuff their sellin' to the bars, just sellin' a few kegs but they're not sellin' package. That's a direct result of people, you know, now having access in Missoula to like a dozen breweries. They're like neighbor deals now. Why are gonna come to Worden's and buy, you know, a six-pack when you're going home? You're not. You're gonna go have your two or three pints and you're gonna fill your growler. You know what I mean.

[ringing cell phone]

BS: Do you think there's room for more breweries in Montana?

TF: That's something I couldn't really even hazard a guess. To me, it's inconceivable that they're all makin' it. I think, I think that if they ... I don't know for fact, I didn't follow it. There was a bill in the legislative -- this last legislative session -- having to do with lowering the tax on those products to allow for the proliferation of these things. Because now what's happening, is the craft brewing industry, along with the distilleries, and now even cideries, all of these are the type of businesses that you dream about having because they're self-sustaining, they pay good wages to a pretty good chunk of people, their employees all of have benefits and good paying jobs. They pay taxes like som bitch, you know.

Fortunately, those guys in Helena have seen fit to continue to allow these things to grow. I could never answer what the tap out is on 'em because who knows. I mean, it depends on the scale of your operation. If you're payin' nothing for 500 square feet, and you got one tank and you sell it all out in one day, you're makin' money. You know, what I mean. Who knows? I know that there are a lot of young, tough smart people still wanting to do it.

BS: Really?

TF: Yeah. Oh yeah. It's amazing. Excuse me just real quick.

BS: 'Kay.

TF: I have to answer this. I got a repairman coming to work on my freezer. That kinda answers question number four, I think.

BS: Right.

TF: Or excuse me, number seven and I see

BS: Yeah, Montana's the largest producer in United States of malting barley.

TF: Yes.

BS: It has the largest malting facility in North America in Great Falls.

TF: That's right.

BS: Pretty amazing.

TF: That's right. I've been a fan of single malt scotch whisky. I have a friend, who's a noted, recognized expert in the world. We've had the Scotsman come here and do tastings. They've gotten to know them and stuff. You know what their question always is, why the hell are you buyin' our whisky? Look what you got -- beautiful water, you've the same kind of climate, you got all this malt. How come you're not makin' your own whisky? Now, we're starting to. You know, I think there's a beginning of an evolution there as well. It's fantastic, you know, it's just a nice synergy. Montana enjoys economically because of all the I think about the only thing they don't ... we don't grow is the hops.

BS: Right. I was talkin' to somebody that I interviewed. They talked about the difficulties. Apparently, it's a pretty expensive operation to set up 'cause harvest is tricky. I think somebody said that they're trying some in the Bitterroot [Valley] at this point.

TF: Yes. I was just gonna say this. The Bitterroot, agriculturally, has sorta made a comeback.

BS: Right.

TF: You know, with the warming -- global warming. Now you just got ... you got people gettin' rid of grass and puttin' in just frickin' hundreds of acres of apples.

BS: Right. Grapes.

TF: Grapes, yeah. Yep, kinda brave new world. Socially, that's an interesting question. I'm glad you asked that because what I'm seeing are millennials, that this is absolutely a very important part of their life, is the access and the experience of having all these great craft brews around. The producers who do the best, in that regard, are ones who have a yard next to the beer garden so that the kids can run around. This is a family thing. Total family thing. It's interesting because on one hand, you know, you have draconian measures happening with respect to drinking and driving. They never can seem to get, I mean, they continually make it harder, you know, tougher and more painful. Yet, on the other hand, over here, you've got all these young, tough, beautiful people with young families and this is just part of their life. They wouldn't have it any other way. Let me tell you, they really ... that's what they do. They get together and that's what they do.

BS: I talked to a couple of brewers about the forty-eight-ounce limit. Most of 'em are, feel that's just fine.

TF: Well, I think so because as you probably are really well aware, we're not talkin' 3.5 percent beer here, you know. We're averaging five, six percent. Yeah, it would be the equivalent of drinkin' a six-pack. Yeah, forty-eight ounces is about right. Then, of course, with the new quota. You know, they raised it to 60,000 barrels. They also raised how many barrels that can be sold on-premise by the pint. They limited it to 2000 barrels. I think what they intended to do, was limit it to 2016-gallon barrels but the term barrel, as you know refers to thirty-two gallons. If there's anybody in the state of Montana that's gonna sell more than 4000 kegs of beer, by the pint, in a year, then they're probably looking for someone to buy 'em out because their make money like a son of gun. It's a good time to be a beer maker around here.

BS: I interviewed Hal Harper who was the person who introduced the legislation to allow breweries to sell on-premises. His inspiration came from his father who was a Methodist minister in Helena. His father was ... one passion he really had, was anti-gambling. He had noticed that local Montana taverns had gone

over to this machine gambling and the big screen TVs and sports. It was no longer a place to go and have a conversation. He inspired his son Hal to introduce this legislation which finally was successful in 1999.

TF: Yeah, that's fantastic. Yeah, I know of Hal. He's a good guy. Yeah, well

BS: Yeah, it really is a social phenomenon. It's very ... and like you say, the families come in.

TF: Oh yeah. They all sorta get their own little angle too. You know, like up here at Draught Works, that's the hip bar where the hippest guys hang out. That's where all the cool guys Like, for us, you know, when we were comin' up, you always wanted to go to The Depot because that was the place to be seen. Now, it's the Draught Works. Of course, KettleHouse just rocks, you know. It's just because their beer is that good. It wasn't always. When it first came out, I was kind dubious. I still don't drink Cold Smoke. Wouldn't be something that I would ever be interested in drinking. It's not my style. I sure like sellin' it. I sold 1500 cases in one year.

BS: Wow!

TF: Of Cold Smoke alone. Which was more than the total number of cases of Bayern that I sold that year. I'm in the top ... between the top five and top three for volume for Bayern beer. Always have been.

BS: I find it kinda interesting that there's over 5000 craft breweries now in the United States. It's still only five percent of total consumption of beer.

TF: Isn't that amazing!

BS: Yeah! That's just incredible.

TF: Give you an idea the total volume is mindboggling, isn't it?

BS: Yeah.

TF: When you look at Anheuser-Busch sellin' out to In-Bev. They're world That's a world brewery now. A world company. Yeah, it's man oh man! You gotta keep your eye on the horizon because things change really quickly. Right now, people are into all these sour beers. Shit. You know, I've been sellin' them for twenty-five, thirty years. I couldn't, you know, I had to beat someone over the head to get 'em to try 'em. Now, they're just pounding them down my door to get that stuff. It's fantastic. It's really fantastic.

BS: Is there anything else that you feel like you'd like to add?

TF: I don't think so. I think that's pretty good coverage there.

BS: All right. Thanks for doing this!

TF: Sure! Yeah, it's fun.

[Recording ends]